eua SPOTLIGHT ON SUSTAINABILITY

Mapping approaches to sustainability in European higher education

What do universities' strategies tell us?

December 2025
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Introduction

Over the past decade, universities throughout Europe have come to view sustainability as a defining aspect of their strategic thinking, rather than an isolated agenda. This relates to how universities define their institutional missions, engage with society and structure their core activities of education, research and innovation. Having a strategic approach to sustainability reflects universities' will to not solely serve as knowledge holders, but also to be agents of transformation that contribute to addressing urgent global challenges such as climate change, social inequality and economic instability.

Among the institutions that responded to the European University Association's 2025 sustainability and greening survey, 84% have a sustainability strategy in place.[1] As such, this briefing describes how these institutions conceptualise and frame sustainability in their strategic documents.

Methodology

The author reviewed approximately one hundred institutional strategies, roadmaps and action plans to identify common themes and approaches.

These documents were published between 2018 and 2025, and provided by universities' representatives as responses to EUA surveys in 2021 and 2025. This briefing makes no distinction between the internal purpose of the documents, rather it focuses on how each university's approach to the sustainability agenda is articulated therein.

Given the large volume and diversity of materials, the analytical process combined human review with AI-assisted synthesis. The author used ChatGPT Plus to support the extraction of recurring themes, identify focus areas and cluster strategic approaches. The AI tool was guided by a detailed prompt with the instruction to analyse each document, identify the key themes and practices, compare findings across universities and propose conceptual dimensions through which institutional strategies could be categorised.

The author provided specific examples and expectations, reviewed each output and refined the instructions to improve clarity and depth. All AI-generated results were systematically verified using a representative sample. The final synthesis, including the interpretative dimensions presented in this report, was produced based on human-validated findings.

In short, ChatGPT Plus was used as analytical assistant and not as a content generator. Its role was to facilitate the organisation of information and pattern recognition across a large dataset, allowing the authors to focus on qualitative interpretation and validation of the information.

1 H. Stoeber & M. Gaebel, Sustainability and greening in European higher education, European University Association, 2025.

According to EUA's 2025 survey findings[2], most universities embed sustainability within overarching institutional strategies (50%), where it appears as core to their mission or as one of the pillar priorities shaping the direction of the institution. Universities also use dedicated sustainability strategies (31%) or annual reports (42%) focused entirely on climate, environmental and social thematic areas. Some complement their strategies with action plans or roadmaps, typically structured around short- to medium-term goals (e.g. 1 to 5 years). 11% of institutions have a strategy under preparation and 3% refer to the strategies of individual faculties. In some cases, institutional websites provide information on the topic of sustainability without reference to specific strategies.

Across the strategies analysed here, universities tend to refer to the definition of sustainability outlined in the UN-commissioned Brundtland Report (1987),[3] which introduced the idea of sustainable development as the result of interconnections between nature, society and the economy. As affirmed by the **University of Rome Tor Vergata (Italy)**: "*The concept of sustainability includes not only environmental protection and the preservation of natural resources, but also equitable economic development and social progress that guarantees the fundamental rights of all citizens.*"[4]

Within this broader context, three dimensions emerge through which institutions define, structure and communicate sustainability: 1) Behaviour-oriented, 2) value-oriented, and 3) target-oriented approaches. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive as a single strategy but may include elements of each. However, strategies tend to show a dominant framing that shapes the document's tone, priorities and institutional logic. Importantly, they signal how European universities understand their role in addressing sustainability, how they see themselves within wider society and what kind of future they want to shape.

Across the three dimensions and their implementation, it becomes clear that universities are not just responding to sustainability as a technical or reputational requirement. They share a growing sense that sustainability is not something to be added on top of existing activities and structures, rather it has become central to how universities define their purpose. These dimensions are not fixed positions. They evolve over time as universities reassess their strategies, respond to external pressures and experiment with new approaches to sustainability.

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>
> University of Rome Tor Vergata (Italy)

2 Idem.

3 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future, available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf

4 Tor Vergata Università degli Studi di Roma, Rapporto di sostenibilità 2023.

For European universities, sustainability is...

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>
> University of Strasbourg (France)

Behaviour-oriented

Many universities see themselves as agents of change in the sustainability transition, with a clear willingness to lead, rather than just respond to external pressures. Here, sustainability is treated as a catalyst for environmental, societal and economic transformation within and beyond universities.

- For example, at the **University of Strasbourg (France)** "*The term 'transformation' refers to profound and accelerated change [...] a condition for respecting the UN Agenda 2030 and the recommendations of the IPCC and IPBES*". This ambition starts internally, within the university community. Concretely, the university promotes everyday behavioural change through 'écogestes' ('ecological actions'), encouraging staff and students to adopt low-impact habits as part of a shared commitment to sustainability.[5] These actions signal a vision to involve the community in transformation action.
- Transformation is similarly articulated at the **University of St Andrews (UK)**: "*transformational solutions are needed, both for the University to make itself sustainable and for our community to play its fullest role in enabling society to achieve sustainability.*"[6]

However, universities pursuing transformation acknowledge that change is uncertain, but still necessary.

- This is noted by the **University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences of Vienna – BOKU (Austria)**: "*A socio-ecological transformation for sustainable development requires fundamental changes. These changes disrupt prevailing routines, structures, and mindsets, necessitating individual and societal behavioural changes and often encountering resistance. Such processes take time and have uncertain outcomes.*"[7]

5 Université de Strasbourg, Schéma directeur Développement durable & responsabilité sociétale et environnementale 2025-2029.
6 University of St Andrews, Environmental Sustainability Strategy Net Zero 2035.
7 University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences of Vienna (BOKU), Sustainability strategy. Accessible at: https://boku.ac.at/en/wissenschaftliche-initiativen/zentrum-fuer-globalen-wandel-nachhaltigkeit/themen/nachhaltigkeit/strategie.

- **CY Cergy Paris Université (France)** intends to train *"100% of students in ecological and societal transition by 2030."*[8] This reflects that transformation comes with concrete goals, such as providing the academic community with the necessary tools for the transition and therefore embedding sustainability across all disciplines and functions.

- The purpose of **University of the Basque Country's (Spain)** environmental and health strategy goes beyond trying to mitigate the climate and environmental crisis, by trying *"to educate people to change their habits and customs to make them more sustainable and healthy."*[9] Through collective engagement, the university promotes behavioural change across its community and prioritises its campuses as laboratories for transformative and sustainable practices.

- Similarly, **Bialystok University of Technology (Poland)** aims to transform the university into a model space for research and didactics and envisions itself as shaping a more sustainable future not only for its campus, but for its region and country.[10]

This dimension includes also visionary and symbolic aspects.

- For example, the rector of **Kozminski University (Poland)** evokes the image of the university as a "*frigate navigating a rough ocean covered in thick fog*", where the institutional strategy becomes the chart guiding the university safely in times of uncertainty. [11]

Values-oriented

In multiple cases, sustainability is represented as a matter of the university's societal responsibility and institutional mission, as well as its core values such as equity, diversity and inclusion.

Here, sustainability is not framed as a transformative ambition, but rather as a continuation of the university's responsibility, mission and values. In addition, strategies tend to refer to international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a central ethical and symbolic reference for their own values.

- For instance, **EHESP French School of Public Health (France)** notes the integration of an "*ethical dimension in all activities,*" tying environmental responsibility to institutional values.[12]

- At **Hanken School of Economics (Finland)** an equity, diversity and inclusion plan is an integral part of the sub-strategy on sustainability and responsibility, positioned on the same level as the goals of achieving carbon neutrality and minimising the environmental footprint. Within the strategy, sustainability is considered as one of key strategical shifts of the institutional environment and the institution underlines the importance of values: "*Environmental, social and governance-related sustainability will impact all university operations. This shift implies a need to develop policies on social sustainability and calls for a deep understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion in the university community and beyond."*[13]

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> Hanken School of Economics (Finland)

8 CY Cergy Paris Université. Accessible at : https://www.cyu.fr/universite/decouvrir-cyu/nos-ambitions-et-valeurs/transition-environnementale-et-societale/actions-menees-dans-le-domaine-academique.
9 University of the Basque Country, Pilot Environmental and Health Management Plan 2019-2025.
10 Bialystok University of Technology, Sustainable Development Strategy – My green university, 2022.
11 Kozminski University, Strategy 2021-2030.
12 EHESP French School of Public Health, Strategical institutional project 2019-2023.
13 Hanken School of Economics, Hanken 2030. For an international world and a sustainable Finland.

This value-based orientation is also reflected in the educational function of the university.

- **Cherkasy National University (Ukraine)**, for instance, places strong emphasis on citizenship education and promotes critical thinking, media literacy and the values of civil society, democracy and the rule of law as part of its sustainability strategy.[14]

In this regard, some universities describe sustainability as already inherent to their institutional identity.

- For example, **Saxion University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands)** refers to sustainability as part of its DNA.[15]
- Similarly, the **International European University IEU (Ukraine)** states that "*sustainability is not just an abstract concept; it is an integral part of our organisational DNA,*"[16] which suggests continuity between sustainability commitments and the university's ethos.

Another recurring aspect of this dimension is explicit references to the university's responsibility for the future.

- The **University of Warsaw (Poland)**, for instance, articulates this perspective clearly, presenting the institution as a guardian of future generations.[17]
- Similarly, **Grenoble École de Management (France)** takes a forward-looking approach, with the purpose of anticipating transitions towards a sustainable future. Through its strategy, the school wants to prepare students to engage critically with global sustainability challenges.[18]

14 Bohdan Khmelnytskyi National University of Cherkasy, Sustainable development strategy until 2030.
15 Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Saxion roadmap 2020-2024.
16 International European University IEU Kyiv, 2023-2028 Sustainable Development Strategy.
17 University of Warsaw, The Climate Change and Sustainable Development Agenda.
18 Grenoble École de Management, 2030 Strategic Plan.

Target-oriented

According to EUA's 2025 survey, 78% of institutional work on sustainability and greening includes "concrete goals, targets, indicators and/or timelines".[19] Indeed, in many university strategies, sustainability is seen as a complex challenge to be addressed through structured and coordinated responses. The focus lies on planning, integration and measurable outcomes, often framed through (inter)national climate targets, institutional roadmaps or performance indicators.

> *It is time to communicate better and clearly the direction and translate the roadmap into measures*
>
> Saxion University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands)

Here, universities see themselves as structured organisations capable of operational delivery. The tone is analytical and result- or objective-oriented, reflecting an internal logic of project management, accountability and alignment with external policies.

Strategic documents in this category often organise sustainability around specific goals, key performance indicators (KPIs), SWOT analyses and roadmaps, frequently aligned with national frameworks. The SDGs are often used as reference points, either for structuring institutional strategies or for monitoring activities across teaching, research and operations.

- For instance, **Technological University Dublin (Ireland)** connects its climate goals directly to national policy, aiming for carbon neutrality by 2040, and consolidates curricular, operational, and engagement initiatives into a unified roadmap.[20]

19 H. Stoeber & M. Gaebel, Sustainability and greening in European higher education, European University Association, 2025.
20 Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), Strategic Plan 2024-2028.

- **SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Poland)**, sets the objective of becoming a green university by 2029, with detailed descriptions of what that means on a multidimensional level: carbon reduction, curriculum change, green infrastructure and technological adaptation.[21]

- **Ca' Foscari University (Italy)** quantifies its sustainability engagement with numbers, reporting that 36% of courses address sustainability topics, as well as an increase of 27% of publications on sustainability.[22]

- The **University of Córdoba (Spain)** shows this pragmatic logic through its sustainability plan, which includes 94 actions clustered across thematic areas such as mobility, waste, procurement and education. Each action is associated with specific indicators, a timeline and designated responsible units.[23]

This pragmatic orientation often translates into a focus on institutional integration and continuous performance review, including the acknowledgement of institutional weaknesses and threats.

- As noted in the strategy of **Saxion University of Applied Sciences (the Netherlands)**, "*It is time to communicate better and clearly the direction and translate the roadmap into measures*,"[24] emphasising the clear shift from vision to execution.

- Among the weaknesses listed by the **University of Porto (Portugal)** in its SWOT analysis appear ageing infrastructure, limited capacity for international cooperation and constraints in financial autonomy.[25]

- This demonstrates that universities recognise their weaknesses and threats and are ready to improve, as confirmed by one of the activities envisaged in the **Democritus University of Thrace (Greece)** strategy: "*Conduct a campus-wide sustainability audit to identify areas for improvement and set clear sustainability goals aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*".[26]

Some institutions extend this solution-oriented logic into models that focus on collaboration and engagement with external entities.

- For example, **KU Leuven (Belgium)** emphasises the university's role in providing "*answers to those questions that policy-makers face in their daily practice.*"[27] Through the Leuven 2030 Urban Lab, researchers collaborate directly with local actors to co-design practical sustainability solutions. This structured engagement reflects a solution-oriented direction that positions the university as an active actor in shaping policy and territorial innovation.

21 SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, University strategy 2024-2029.
22 Ca' Foscari University, Sustainability report 2023.
23 University of Cordoba, Environmental sustainability plan 2019-2022.
24 Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Saxion roadmap 2020-2024.
25 University of Porto, Strategical Plan, 2020.
26 Democritus University of Thrace, DUTH at the crossroads of Europe and Asia Connecting worlds, Strategic Plan 2025-2028.
27 KU Leuven, Strategic Plan for KU Leuven, website: https://www.kuleuven.be/english/about-kuleuven/strategic-plan/sustainability.

Do university strategies account for the governance of sustainability activities?

Although almost all universities have governance structures for sustainability in practice, approaches vary and their visibility in institutional strategies is uneven due to the different internal status of such documents. These strategies typically emphasise values or long-term goals (such as achieving climate neutrality by a specific year), but do not specify which bodies are responsible for coordination, implementation and monitoring. This does not mean that there is no clear implementation in practice, only that implementation is not always explicit in the documents.[28]

In some strategies, governance is acknowledged only in general terms, for example as a function of central leadership or as part of the institution's responsibilities. These references remain vague and rarely detail structures, roles or mechanisms. In these cases, the existence of structures is implied, but roles, dedicated offices and reporting procedures are unspecified.

In contrast, other strategies provide precise information on governance. They mention specific leadership roles using different terminology (such as vice-rectors for sustainability or sustainability managers). Responsibilities are assigned, monitoring systems are described and reporting procedures are made visible. Such detail conveys an image of responsibility and transparency.

In the final set of strategies, governance is described as linking top-down leadership with grassroots initiatives, presenting sustainability as a shared responsibility across the academic community. They combine sustainability offices or green offices with bottom-up networks, staff–student partnerships or institutionally recognised think tanks.

Beyond the differences in how implementation is described, there is also variation in where it is positioned within institutional planning. In some cases, references appear in the overarching university strategy, signalling sustainability as a transversal priority, but often in broad terms. In others, they are set out in dedicated sustainability strategies, where operational detail is greater but the link to the institution's central mission can seem less direct.

In sum, the visibility of governance structures and responsibilities in sustainability strategies varies widely, reflecting the contrasting ways in which universities frame responsibility in this area, from aspirational commitments to formalised mechanisms and participatory models.

28 A forthcoming EUA report on university governance and sustainability will analyse the implementation of such measures in greater depth.

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The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

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